



Trust and social relationships in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Background: It is well known that the quality of social relationships is related to mental health, particularly in the face of adversity. Social relationships are complex and can perhaps not be fully understood from a purely individual perspective. Recent contributions have highlighted the need for a societal or ecological approach (Ajduković, 2013; Bryant, 2016; Maercker & Hecker, 2016). In this study, we expand on previous social relationships research by investigating generalized trust (the belief that most other people can be trusted) during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we conceptualize as a slow-motion disaster. Not only close relationships, but also generalized trust, are associated with better physical and mental health, prosperity, and well-being (Dinesen, 2012). As such, generalized trust is an asset that may help people to cope with adversities. The knowledge about generalized trust in disasters is very limited, but a few studies have indicated that the external threat and the display of mutual aid may stimulate increased connectedness and a sense of community in the general population (Cassar, Healy, & Von Kessler, 2017; Sibley et al., 2020). Directly exposed individuals, however, may feel marginalized and expelled. In this study, we investigate the potential impact of the pandemic on generalized trust.

Objectives: The objectives of the current study were to assess whether generalized trust had increased in an early pandemic phase compared to pre-pandemic levels, and whether trust was lower in individuals who felt particularly threatened or were particularly burdened in the pandemic.

Methods: We compared levels of generalized trust in a population-representative Norwegian sample ($n = 1041$) with pre-pandemic levels measured in the European Social Survey (ESS). Age- and gender-adjusted expected scores were compared to observed scores, using weighted data. Secondly, we tested whether indicators of pandemic-related strains, perceived health risk, or pandemic-related worry were associated with a reduced level of generalized trust. This cross-sectional study was conducted in an early opening-up phase (May 2020).

Results: The observed levels of generalized trust in an early pandemic phase did not differ significantly from expected levels based on pre-pandemic measures. Increased trust was found for individuals who reported personal experience with COVID-19 (tested positive, admitted to hospital, or lost someone to the disease). Pandemic-related worry and a high perceived health threat were both associated with a lower level of generalized trust.

Conclusions: Individuals who had personal experience with the disease may have had first-hand experiences with kindness and helpfulness from medical personnel or from other people, which may have generalized into increased trust in other people. People who feel particularly vulnerable or worried may lose trust in others, which constitutes a loss of a potentially protective factor. Our results suggest that generalized trust in other people may be affected by disasters and adversity, both positively and negatively, depending on the individual's personal disaster experiences. Generalized trust may be an important, although often overlooked, protective factor for people who face trauma and adversity.

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